

January 2023 Op-Ed: The Case for Extending Free Public School Meals

As Superintendent of Plainville Community Schools, I have many hopes and dreams for our school community and for all of our students. Our vision statement guides my work as a district leader: *To inspire and prepare lifelong learners to follow their passion, engage in their communities, and positively impact our global society.* Our strategic plan, goals and actions are all intended to help students arrive at this outcome. In essence, we want each of our students to be ready to succeed in whatever life and career path they choose, and we help them to find their path during their 13 years in our schools.

It may seem strange to include within my aspirations for students that none of them goes through a day hungry. After all, what does hunger have to do with educating students toward the vision shared above? Well, this belief is one that isn't only supported by research, but it is one I can attest to from my personal experiences, and I believe anyone can do the same. Hunger, or the absence of hunger, has everything to do with learning and development toward higher level, visionary goals. Well known psychologist Abraham Maslow proposed a *hierarchy of needs* based on his extensive research on motivation and human behavior during the mid-twentieth century. His research and findings established important foundations for the concept of multiple levels of need, with lower levels of need being foundational to more advanced development toward *self-actualization and transcendence*. In simple terms, we can't learn or focus efforts on higher level needs and goals if we have not met our basic human needs for food, shelter and physical safety. This should make sense to everyone who has missed a meal and has a growling stomach, because our thoughts tend to continue to be drawn back to meeting the need to eat before we can think about other less immediate and more abstract needs and goals.

Understanding how important food security is to learning, we have been fortunate to feed every school child who wanted a meal over the last two years. This is typically a significant

challenge due to the cost of doing so, but federal funds were provided to enable this. With subsidized funding came broadened opportunities that extended beyond simply providing meals to children. The ability to give meals to everyone wanting to eat has been a game changer, because it removed not only physical and monetary barriers to feeding students, but it also removed some of the stigma to students taking advantage of school lunch. By providing meals to everyone, some of the old stigmas began to fade away. Long held habits and beliefs tend to change slowly but I'm pleased to report that after two years, free meals have made a profound difference here.

In the old days in our school district, (those days before COVID already seem long ago), about 40%, or 10 students in a class of 25 would get a school lunch. That happens to be about the same number of students in that classroom who qualify for free or reduced price lunch. Sure, before free meals for all, we had a number of students buying meals. But, we also had students who qualified for free meals who didn't participate. A child's world isn't always straightforward. There are many times when a student would rather conform than stand out. For some, getting in line for school lunch can be a bigger decision than you might imagine because social implications can outweigh even the basic need of hunger. I know this because I grew up as that child who would dread getting in the school breakfast and lunch line each day. In my days in school, the process for receiving free lunch was much different. I would have to select items that qualified for free lunch (not everything was included) and then stand in line with my friends until I came to the dreaded lunch cashier (no offense intended) who would ask me to pay for my meal. I would have to tell her my name and say, "I get free lunch." She would then look me up on the list, check me off, and approve of me walking out without paying. To many, this would not seem to be a big deal, but for a child and especially a teenager, that experience was embarrassing and resulted in a lot of anxiety. I would always hope the lunch lady with the task of collecting money would just remember me and check me off without asking, but that was often not the case. There were days when I was sitting with new friends who would ask me to go up

to the line with them, but I would try to wait so I was at the end, to avoid embarrassment. Still, I was very grateful to receive the free meals throughout all of my years in school because they sustained me, and I could always count on them. As an athlete and someone who was very active in band and jazz band, I can't imagine getting through those long days without eating. For those who have seen me, I understand that I don't look like the type who misses many meals. Fortunately for me, despite the embarrassment, I had food security at school because of the free meals program.

We had already worked hard to put an end to the stigma that kids like me faced in years past. Our system doesn't require students to identify whether their account is funded by their parents or by the program. Yet, despite our best efforts, some students continued to go hungry. Then, over the past two years, participation in our program grew steadily, to a point where, on any given day, any student will eat lunch. Throughout the pandemic and due to the availability of better and better meals due to our talented cafeteria leadership and staff, that stigma has faded and more students than ever have been choosing to get school meals. On *smiley face fries day*, almost everyone eats lunch! Now, by our last count, 58% of Plainville students eat lunch. In addition, those who eat breakfast have grown from 4% a few years ago to now 22%! This is a great thing for the reasons shared previously. We need to eat a healthy meal in order to have the physical and psychological needs met, so we focus on bigger and better things.

When we look at the economic data related to Plainville families, we know that many in our community struggle to make ends meet, yet have just enough income so that they don't qualify for the program. A family of four with annual income of more than \$36,075 does not qualify for free meals and a family of four with annual income of more than \$51,338 does not qualify for reduced meals. These families may not have the available money to deposit funds in their children's lunch account.

Of course, we have a number of families in our community who can afford to pay and food insecurity is not an issue for their children. Due to strong participation rates and subsidies,

our Food Services Department was able to move from a deficit to a surplus in their account, and a decision was made by our leadership team, and supported by the Board of Education, to extend free meals for all through the end of this school year using those surplus funds to offset the costs. Unfortunately, this option will not be available next year. However; perhaps we can look to establish another model that would provide options for hungry children who don't qualify for reduced cost meals? We have discussed starting a meal-offset fund where community members could contribute and those funds could be used to offset what otherwise would be local taxpayer cost. I hope we can establish such a fund to continue supplementing free or reduced cost meals for those who don't qualify on paper, but who need such support to make ends meet. I have witnessed the tight knit community of Plainville come together for those in need, time and time again, and hope they will consider doing so again.

In closing, once the surplus food services account has been expended at the end of this school year, we will look for other ways to provide food security to those in need. I hope that those among us who are able to do so will consider getting involved and partner with us toward this aspiration. Unfortunately, with the extended meal funding coming to an end, we will begin charging non qualifying families at the return to school in the Fall. Unless something happens, we will be back to the old system, and facing many of the old problems.

We hope the Connecticut Legislature acts to extend funding of school meals in the future. Yet, an extensive number of bills will be debated in the next legislative session, and extending free meals for all is only one of them. Of all the priorities I can think of, few have the potential fundamental impact of free meals for all. Many of the other costs of school are for naught if a student isn't physically and psychologically available to learn. A hungry child is not available to learn. In my personal opinion, and based on my experiences growing up with very little through no fault of my mother, free meals for all is an important investment in children and carries a high return on school investment.

What can you do? Please allow me to share with you information from End Hunger Connecticut. [Click here](#) and scroll down until you see *Take Action and Contact Legislators* to connect to your legislators and provide a message that you can use, add your own points to the message, or write your own message. You can also paste this link into your browser if the link above does not work: <https://www.endhungerct.org/advocacy/schoolmeals4allct/#/3/>. Thank you for your support to those who wish to eat. If we work together to address this most basic human need, we will allow more students to focus on learning and achieving their full potential.

Steve LePage, Superintendent of Schools